



# THAT'S JUST HOW IT IS AROUND HERE.

By Katie McElveen

There's something inherently welcoming about a side door; somehow, entering through it makes you feel like family. And when that side door is painted lively turquoise and flanked by funky sculptures, as it is at Café Rebecca in Bluffton, you can bet you'll be greeted with open arms. Café Rebecca isn't unique in its attitude: all over Bluffton, one of South Carolina's most historic small towns, owners of the quirky boutiques and lovely galleries that line the shady streets make visitors feel like family.

Perched on a breezy bluff overlooking the May River, Bluffton's cool currents were what first drew visitors to this tiny hamlet nearly 200 years ago. Most, planter families from Charleston, Savannah, GA, and Beaufort, came in search of relief from the heat and mosquitoes that made both their in-town and plantation residences unbearable during the sweltering summer months. Finding it, they stayed, turning the sleepy Lowcountry crossroads into a summer gathering place. Before long, the town earned a reputation for laid-back friendliness that has remained.

"We call it the Bluffton state of mind," says Maureen Richards, director of the town's Heyward House Historic Center. "Bluffton was originally settled as a resort town, and we've held on to that attitude."

Calhoun Street, which rises from the banks of the May River, forms Bluffton's heart, and it's here, in the shade of massive moss-draped oaks, where you can wander past some of the oldest houses in southern Beaufort County, explore antebellum churches and watch boats meander down the river, just as visitors and locals have done for hundreds of years.

Start your tour with a visit to Heyward House. Nestled into a shady grove fragrant with blooming jessamine and guarded by towering pines, the cottage also serves as Bluffton's Historic Center. Built in 1840, it's a well-preserved example of the Carolina Farmhouse style of architecture. A recently refurbished slave cabin, one of just a few to be constructed of wood, is also open to the public, providing a rare glimpse into the intersecting lives of pre-Civil War Lowcountry families.

Be sure to make your way to the Church of the Cross, one of just a handful of buildings spared when Union troops burned more than three-quarters of the town in 1863.

Constructed of cypress planks and offering an unobstructed view of the river, the church is a peaceful respite despite all that it has seen.

Old meets new in Bluffton, and they've made great friends. Clatter over the scarred pine floors at The Store, and you'll find tableware from Mottahedeh and Vietri on display on the white spindle shelves. There are also French linens, Italian glass and locally made jams, jellies and relishes organized in neat rows along the walls.

Nancy Dolson opened Eggs 'n' tricities—a jumble of gifts, greeting cards, jewelry and decorative items—in an old gas station on the corner of Calhoun and Bridge streets in 1992. Today, under a blue ceiling painted with fluffy white clouds, light, gauzy pants and tops share space with more trendy looks in the nooks and crannies of the shop. In corners, artsy lamps hung with glittering glass beads illuminate the ever-growing collection of painted tables, birdhouses, candles and garden tools. Even the former service bay is part of the action. Packed with antiques, it's a treasure trove of goodies, from wrought-iron settees to old oil company signs.

Bluffton has also welcomed artists into the fold, and a thriving artist colony, comprising potters, painters, photographers, woodworkers and glass designers, gives the town a funky, avant-garde vibe.

Jacob Preston probably won't shake hands when you enter his workshop and gallery, but that's only because, as a working potter, he's generally up to his elbows in clay. "But pull up a stool and join me," he smiles. "Not everybody gets to visit the home office." Closer to the river, Amos Hummell's tongue-in-cheek "fun-da'metal" paintings fill the walls and loft of his indoor-outdoor studio. Postcards, organized by theme in a basket by the door, are filled with his sassy sayings.

Artist Melissa Enlow's shop, Red Heifer, is replete with not only her work but that of others, most notably her mother and sister. "We're all artists," she says, nodding toward the paintings, sculpture and stained glass pieces scattered around the room. "So you never know what you'll find here."

Except for one thing. That delightful Bluffton state of mind.

